

Revisioning Ecology: *Oikos Logos* and a Human Niche.

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Ecology is the esoteric science of relationships, but it has become unnecessarily obscure, the domain of experts who study populations and statistics and make projections and predictions, but have distressingly little practical advice about how actual humans could or even should be living on earth.

By contrast, a revisioned ecology would be commonly practiced, under the purview of everyone, a ubiquitous study (not *science*) of actual relationships with home. It would be an *oikos logos*, a “home study” that would ostensibly result in a self-realization of the individual-in-community. *Oikos logos* is not new; primal people sought the nature of their relationship-with-place as a preoccupation. It was enacted through a continuous dialogue with the natural communities around them. The shaman was the chief practitioner, but the practice was under the purview of everyone. Diverse knowledge thus gleaned enabled various indigenous peoples to forge integrally situated lives, *human niches*, within a wide array of natural communities.

Historically, niche meant finding and fulfilling one’s place, one’s ecological job, one’s “fit” in milieu, an organism’s “home” ecosystem. For our purposes, niche is to be defined in a way more closely aligned with its affects: as a milieu that educes the flowering of a species. An organism-in-niche flowers as it seemingly effortlessly becomes fully itself! A squirrel in a squirrel niche, for example, exudes a sense of *squirrelness*, a way of being peculiar to squirrels, evident when one is observed. The place seems to flower too. Diverse, vibrant, and resilient ecosystems teem with dynamic niches overlapping niches. Correspondingly, a human niche must necessarily be diverse and vibrantly multicultural with respect to thriving human communities and wildly diverse with respect to thriving other-than-human communities. I will explore how the act of becoming fully human is ineluctably linked to the creation of integral human milieus, of human niches, and that

both may be made possible through an *oikos logos*.

In my forest home, a furry, shade-tail being lives far above. Her tightly gripping claws fasten to a long flat limb swaying in the breeze. A jerking leap lands her upright to face a bright blue sky, tightly-gripping claws on dark, scaly bark swaying in the breeze. She runs up and out onto another limb, takes another leap, twice as long, to land on richly-leafed and acorn-laden stems. Weaving through tangled limbs to a smooth and splotched trunk, she sways in the breeze. A sudden rustling rises from below, startling, a “darting *behind*.” In the ensuing stillness, long bushy tail draped over, she watches, and watches, and watches. Finally, a deep scratchy bark erupts: the language of squirrelness. The bark is repeated again and again; arched tail moves in waves with each successive note. She is facing down now, towards the forest floor, tail curling up and over, rippling. Spinning around, she climbs up and up. Clawed hands pull off a green spiky cone. Razor teeth rip to get at tasty seeds inside. Tinkling pieces drop through the sub-canopy onto the needled ground below.

Squirrelness ever ensues when a squirrel is in-niche, in this case a forest ecosystem. Engaged there, in a milieu seemingly tailor-made for her kind, she has a “role” to perform. Indeed the milieu is tailor-made because she helped make it! Burying acorns she will never find is in fact planting oak groves! Knocking off twirling pine seeds at a time when these *naked seeds* must sprout to survive helps plant pine forests! This is what squirrelness does, but how? Through years of observing squirrels in squirrel niches I have come to surmise that it is a direct result of a way of “seeing” the forest canopy.

Where I would see a maze of tangled limbs, a squirrel sees diverging roads to places providing various needs, the sheltering nest, the acorn-laden oak grove, the hollowed black gum cache. When instinctual ways of knowing meet what is perceived, specific behaviors arise. All of this culminates in an unmistakable way of being: squirrelness. Gestures of squirrelness along with gestures of chickadee-

ness, spider-ness, raccoon-ness and mouse-ness, inspired me almost thirty years ago to move into the forest seeking a milieu within which my unique humanness might spontaneously arise and articulate into being *in the same way* that the squirrel above, ensconced in a milieu suited to her way of being, spontaneously and ineluctably articulates squirrelness.

In this quest I did not know what I was looking for or even how to know it when I found it. I was a scientist then, steeped in the scientific paradigm and normative notions of a mechanical universe. I think oikos logos is now lacking within human communities because the skills to engage in it have atrophied before the pervasive and unquestioned methodologies of western science vis-à-vis western consciousness. I had to move beyond my science bias to do this work and create a methodology for a *phenomenology of nature*. Because I didn't have a guide it was a bootstrapped one; I made it up as I went along.

Phenomenology as philosophical discipline began with Edmund Husserl early in the twentieth century as move away from abstract argument and explanation and a return to direct first-person investigations. His mantra was *back to the things themselves!* Phenomena is the name given to what appears in immediate experience (from the Greek *phainómenon*: the way a thing appears). Phenomenology and the “appearing of the worldly thing” is not limited to mere sense experience but includes meanings and the significance the appearing worldly things have to the observer. First-person investigations render it quite obvious that perceived phenomena do not arise from raw sense data alone but necessarily include a mental component. *Any* act of perception requires a mind! The senses, for instance, cannot tell the difference between a living, stone-shaped being and an inert stone—a mind is required. Similarly, one's senses cannot connect the *separate and individual acts* of perception that delineate the trajectory of a home run baseball. Yet we experience it as a seamless flow of perception—again a product of mind *and* sense. Phenomena are constituted by conscious acts that wed mind and sense. The

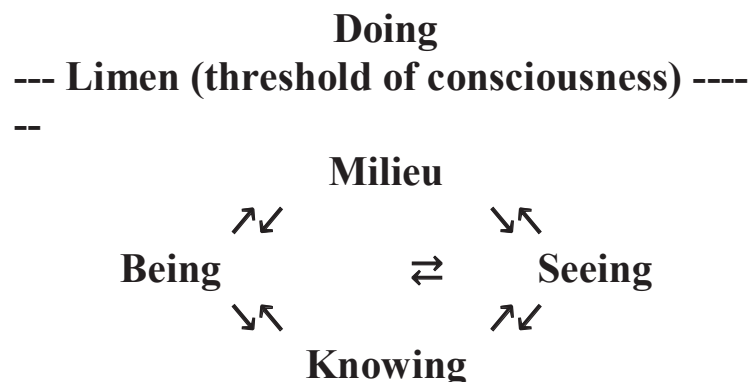
relationship between the two is the locus of phenomenological study. For my purposes, phenomenology was a way of thinking, one that eschewed any and all pre-conceived notions about the way things in the forest really are. Phenomenology kept me out of my own preconceived notions and in intimate in dialogue with the forest and its myriad beings.

The first thing I noticed as my initial “thinking-oriented,” science-directed phenomenology slowly fell away in favor of a more “feeling-oriented” quality-directed one is that relationship can be felt long before being cognitively known, before even being accessible to thinking. My developing feeling-oriented nature phenomenology slowly shied away from preconceived notions of the character of the forest and its constituent organisms. This was excruciating because I was steeped in a paradigm that knows nature prior to any deep engagement with it. By engaging with my forest home dialogically (from Latin *dialogos*: meaning flowing through), I inexplicably began allowing nature to have a voice—and I listened!

Slowly I was enabled to more or less accurately discern qualities of my particular relationship to this place in the form of otherwise inexplicable and ineffable feelings. Perhaps most importantly my behaviors became increasingly what I believe to be *niching behaviors*. I somehow began to feel curiously in-synch with the forest even as I equally became in-synch with my deepest self. I have no other way to describe it beyond that. I was building my house then, slowly building it. The house seemed to be an organic part of the forest, like it had grown there or maybe built there but more in the manner of a fox den than a contemporary house; the bonus was that it felt really good to be there. This enhanced quality of place and life seemed to be the direct result of the dialogical inquiry, the oikos logos I had been practicing. It assessed relationship first through what I call *feeling-knowing*. Only after patiently allowing “feeling-knowing” to elicit deep feelings with the forest did I even begin to think about what those feeling might mean. Only then, I quickly learned, should I begin the process of assessing what those felt relational qualities might mean cognitively, a

process pursued through thinking and meta-thinking. The process is necessarily a dialectic between feeling and thinking: first one then the other, first feeling qualities of relationship with milieu, then thinking about it and what it means to *human-in-niche*, back and forth and *forth and back*, repeatedly.

In this way, directly-accessed feelings about milieu led to increasingly accurate ideas about relationship. Through acting on these ideas, the creation of human niches had become possible, maybe even inevitable. Through this oikos logos, I learned that the way I saw and the way I came to know the world were ineluctably related to my way-of-being in the world—and vice versa. It works both ways. I learned that my “doing” arises out of what I have come to call *not-doing*. The components of this “not-doing” are: BEING (the way I *am*), KNOWING (how I come to know: thinking, instinct, etc.) and SEEING (how I see the world). Later I experientially learned that none of this is context-free: *where* matters. To wit: city living conspires to effect a way of being-seeing-knowing that is substantially different from an isolated desert way of being-seeing-knowing, which is different than a sub-tropical forest way of being-seeing-knowing (I have tried performing the oikos logos in a variety of milieus; it seems to work in all of them). Along with the others, milieu completes a *mandala*, a symbolic microcosm of the universe itself. I have named it the *Mandala of Not-Doing*.



To repeat, the mandala of not-doing models connections between seeing, knowing, being, and milieu and how they affect each other. In other words, a change in the way I see the world *changes* the way I am in the world, just as it *changes* what, and even how I know. Any new idea, notion, or predilection begins in the mandala (below the threshold of consciousness) and is fine-tuned somewhat by deeply-held assumptions as it rises across the limen into consciousness. In the real world, manifestations of this mandala occur with actual humans in actual milieus and specific acts arise. These acts do not necessarily lead to niche. Because consciousness somewhat frees humans from ecosystemic constraints, humans are free to create milieus that are not niches, free to create minimalist survival milieus nearly anywhere—even in outer space. As usual, though, whatever blesses can also curse. Because of this freedom, humans seem to be the only species without instinctual pathways to the beneficial knowledge of relationship with milieu that I have found to be critical for creating a niche. Because of this freedom, humans can (and often do) create survival milieus when they could be creating integral niches. Remember that a human niche is a milieu that educes a flowering of humanness. Oikos logos is a pathway to niche but is contemporarily lacking in actual practice. But this subtle knowledge must ever be just below the threshold. There it appears to be forgotten, or maybe just unvalued, unconsidered and therefore unknown. Either way, I'm convinced that it is still available to us through a dialogical phenomenology of nature—oikos logos—which transforms seeing and knowing by imbuing it with key elements of relationship with place. In this way, being can be ostensibly transformed enough to significantly affect doing; indeed it has worked for me. Oikos logos can transform not-doing in ways that may ostensibly transform contemporary “survival-oriented” individualistic culture into a cooperative culture of *niche*, ostensibly propelling the *tinkering* human species to create on-the-ground, sustainable, even *regenerative*, human milieus, integrally ensconced within viable and vibrantly diverse human and other-than-human milieus.

To address specifics of transforming “doing” through oikos logos, one must first address human relationships with the larger world.

The Integral Ecology Mandala is introduced, below, to indicate four types of human relationships and their respective possible roles in transforming “what we do.”

Transpersonal Ecology
(Human/Godhead)

Social Ecology + **Cultural Ecology**
(Human/Human) (Human/Nature)

Natural Ecology

Observe the horizontal axis: the *Axis of Doing*. The axis of doing is the locus of artifice by which malleable, *created* nature is transformed into human habitats, the where and how humans satisfy their many needs and wants. The phrase “*created* nature” provides a link with Spinoza’s idea of *natura naturata*, material and finished nature, inert and passive, “ready to hand” for being transformed. Cultural and Social Ecology comprise the poles of this axis. Cultural Ecology [from Latin *cultus* or to inhabit] is concerned with the relationship of humans to nature-as-resource. It includes economics [derived from Greek. *oikos-nómos* or house manager] and all forms of managing and controlling wild nature. Through culture, humans perform specific acts in specific places to transform nature into human milieus by, for instance, tilling it, burning it, hammering it, forging it, poisoning it, always in association with others. Social Ecology [from Latin *socios* or companion] acknowledges these associations; it recognizes that no human lives in isolation from other humans. All forms of social order arise and evolve out of those relations.

Now, observe the vertical axis: the *Axis of Not-Doing*. The axis of not-doing is the locus of human spiritual relationships. These include interior spiritual relationships (mind/soul) and exterior spiritual relationships (*spiritus loci/anima loci*). Interior and exterior, inner and outer continually interpenetrate; they are distinct but not separate.

In contrast to the “created” and finished nature of the horizontal axis, nature along the vertical axis is considered to be unfinished, in-process, and self-creating: Spinoza’s *natura naturans*. Ostensibly, through acts of spiritual transformation, humans and milieu can co-transform. Natural Ecology and Transpersonal Ecology comprise the poles of this axis. When attending to one’s personal Natural Ecology, one eventually finds oneself ensconced in a vibrant spiritual milieu, astonishingly so. Malleable seeing, being, and knowing comes face-to-face with an equally malleable milieu. One confronts one’s “fully-human humanness,” the person s/he was born to become, the one that might be ever brought to bear in whatever situation s/he may find herself. Transpersonal Ecology is closely related; indeed they necessarily overlap. Transpersonal Ecology refers to the relationship between human and the godhead, the divine: what the Sioux call *wakan* and what phenomenologist Rudolf Otto calls *wholly other*. This pole concerns the relationship of human vis-à-vis the transpersonal, numinous ground out of which the phenomenological world arises. Humanness is necessarily a form of *wholeness*; to become whole requires that the human connects with the divine ground out of which she spiritually arises.

In actual human beings, the use of this model to describe the four ecologies presupposes that the four ecological aspects are integrated within that human being. Becoming centered within this *wheel* leads ineluctably to the stated goal of integration and wholeness. To accomplish this, a balanced manifestation of each aspect is required. Such a balance would imply that viable relationships exist in the qualities delineated in each direction. Humans are effective at analyzing (breaking apart aspects), formulating action plans, and acting on them in the ecologies along the horizontal axis of doing. Humans are always *doing*; the question is whether or not that doing leads to survival milieus or to integrated niches of flowering. The latter, the creation of human niches, depends upon knowledge of one’s actual relationship to milieu, knowledge that lies within the domain of not-doing (the vertical axis). It is only through possession and use of this knowledge that viable, integrated relationships and concomitant self-

realized wholeness can arise.

Through oikos logos, knowledge of one's relationship with milieu can be attained and the balanced ecologies of the vertical axis of not-doing can be applied to the actual world, a troubled world that needs it. Should we possess this knowledge, our plans for the resource-focused and interpersonal ecologies of the horizontal axis of doing might begin to favor the creation of human niches, niches ostensibly increasingly occupied by more or less self-realized human beings. These integrated human niches, if they are true *niches* that educe *flowering*, would in no way resemble our contemporary walled-off and paved, humanized and artificial milieus, settings that are purposely segregated by artifice, poison, concrete, and steel from other earth dwellers. Rather, integrated human niches effectively blend with others, hidden in plain sight as if they arose out of the earth like trees, a co-creation with myriad other beings, ensconced within the eco-systemic wholeness that is the biosphere, integrated, much like the squirrel niche is integrated and naturally situated within a forest ecosystem. A revisioned ecology that universally practices some form of oikos logos could cooperatively result in a blooming of niche creation that might one day spread over a post-utopian landscape. Ensconced there, everywhere, integrally-situated, self-realized individuals might one day be doing the good work of *acting in the service of Gaia*. That is my dream.

